BELOVED ADVERSARY

June 28, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 10:34-39
Genesis 32:22-32

"And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day." --Genesis 32:24 (RSV)

It had been twenty years. Twenty years ago Jacob had so deeply offended his family he had to flee for his life. Twenty years ago he had conspired with his mother to deceive his father and cheat his brother. It was so unseemly, so utterly wrong, so morally outrageous, that he had to run for it.

The last time he had crossed this stream he was a fugitive, alone, scared to death, with nothing but the clothes on his back... and now he was coming home.

He had learned some things over the years. He had learned, for instance, that God had a way of showing up in his life in unexpected times and places. There was that stunning dream years ago, on the way out, fleeing for his life... a ladder and angels and God saying that this god-forsaken place where he was sleeping, shivering, with his head resting on a rock - that this place was God's dwelling place... and there was that unforgettable promise that God would be with him and keep him wherever he went.

It occurred to Jacob that it was a good time for that promise to come through... because when he met Esau... he might need some "keeping," some divine protection. The last time he saw Esau, twenty years before, he was in the process of cheating him out of his inheritance.

It's a great story. It's a reminder that the story of God is always woven into human stories, stories of men and women who lived and loved and died and who sound very much like us. God, from the beginning, is not an abstraction. God is not very well described as the First Cause, the Ethical Imperative, or even the ineffable, inimitable, omnipotent source of all being, but rather - from the beginning - the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel.

The story is at least 3,600 years old; maybe older. Hearing it is like looking at a fragment of pottery in the Museum of Natural History. Time alone has made it precious. It has existed - people have been telling it and hearing it and appreciating it for 3,600 years.

It's a big story. The text this morning is part of a complex saga.

Let's recover the essence of it. We believe it contains God's word... a word which, by God's spirit, reaches across 3,600 years to intersect with our stories and address us.

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, the second-born twin, son of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob was his mother's favorite. The first born, Esau, was his father's favorite. Early in the story Jacob managed to convince his brother Esau to exchange his birthright for a bowl of stew. But that was only the prelude to one of the cleverest scams in literature.

With the collusion of his mother, Jacob managed to deceive his old and nearly blind father and cheat his brother out of his inheritance. That's why Jacob fled. Esau, understandably, had vowed to kill him. Jacob fled to his uncle's place, and it is on the way, on the first night out that Jacob has that remarkable dream about a ladder and angels going up and down and God repeats the covenant promise - about the land and descendants as numerous as the sands and assures Jacob that - God will be with him and keep him wherever he goes. Where he goes is to his uncle Laban's place - for about twenty years and his proclivity to dishonesty and deception didn't alter much.

He worked as a herdsman. He married Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel. He fathered many children - for whom the twelve tribes of Israel would be later named, and he became enormously rich. His success is due, again, to fraud and deception. As a matter of fact, Jacob has been systematically stealing Laban's sheep out from under him. And when he has accumulated so much wealth it's embarrassing, he conveniently hears God telling him it's time to go home, which he does, secretly, at night, while Laban is away on a business trip. Rachel even runs back in at the last minute and steals the family valuables from her father's house for good measure.

That's who stands at the stream peering across into Canaan - looking out for Esau, the brother he cheated twenty years earlier. His immense caravan of livestock and family is stretched out across miles of desert and Jacob begins to ponder what will happen when he finally meets up with his brother. Jacob divides his caravan into two parts - in case of attack he will not loose everything - makes careful arrangements to give Esau elaborate gifts to appease him, sends them all across the ford at the Jabbock and then the waiting begins. Jacob spends the night alone. He left home twenty years ago, young, single, with nothing but the cloak on his back. And here he is twenty years later, wives, sons and daughters, enormously wealthy, a man of influence; still a fugitive, still frightened, waiting for the dawn.

During the night, Jacob is attacked - not by Esau, but by a faceless, anonymous stranger, a man who will not be identified, who wounds Jacob in the thigh and, because Jacob is now holding on to him for dear life and will not let him go, blesses Jacob again, just before disappearing at the first light. And this chapter of the story ends with Jacob, now called Israel, limping home to a reunion with Esau.

What do you make of this story... this very earthy saga about a shrewd businessman cheating his brother, deceiving his father, stealing

from his father-in-law, wrestling all night with a stranger just this side of the promised land? A Bronze-Age myth? Or is God's word for us in the story?

I think it's important to laugh at this story. G. K. Chesterton said somewhere that one of the characteristics of a good religion is that you can laugh at it. Jacob is an endearing rascal but thoroughly a rascal. The scholars tell us that the story has humor in it which, in our too-serious piety, we often miss. When Jacob is stealing from Laban, actually outwitting him, because Laban is trying to cheat Jacob, the people listening to the story 3,600 years ago were chuckling: one of them, a Jew, was outsmarting one of those people - a pagan. When Laban comes storming into the tent looking through all the huge sacks for his household gods which Rachel has stolen, and can't find them because Rachel is sitting on them and won't get up, the listeners were laughing out loud at the ludicrous and awkward potential of that situation.

What we ought to make of this story initially is that God's man is not God's man because he is a pure, devout and pious saint. Jacob's character is thoroughly ambivalent. Sometimes he is utterly deceptive. At other times he is absolutely responsive and faithful to God. And that, I would submit, is a meaningful figure for most of us. Most of us don't feel like saints. Most of us have done things which we are pretty certain would disqualify us from saintliness, if not membership in anybody's exclusive club of "good people." Groucho Marx once said he wasn't interested in belonging to a club that would let people like him in it... so it is with most of us and saintliness. Many of us make an assumption that faithfulness to God means a steadiness of character and consistency of belief - which, in our experience, we have found to be elusive.

That God intersects with our story is a novel suggestion for many of us. "All theology is autobiography," Frederick Buechner wrote - but most of us assume that applies to others...

Part of the charm and appeal of Garrison Keillor and "Prairie Home Companion," I think, was that Keillor, without being overt about it, asked people to see divine grace in their own lives.

Keillor, who retired from the weekly National Public Radio program he wrote, is very simply one of the best storytellers I have ever heard. What happened, of course, to those who listened - and I was occasionally in that number, is that one identified with the very human characters in the stories and almost mystically, because their lives were so full of rich significance and potential goodness all mixed up with their silliness and humanness - one almost mystically began to examine one's own story with new sensitivity and new awareness. Keillor, in telling abut the people of Lake Woebegon, with respect and gentleness, allowed us to see grace, God's grace in the mundane, everyday realities of our own lives. [See Christian Century, 6/15/87]

I can remember the day when my own theology changed and included, for the first time, the notion that God is a Beloved Adversary. I can remember the conversation. I was talking with friends. He was a new pastor, as I was. She was an unemployed high school teacher in a rural Indiana

community that had more teachers than it needed. He had been an electrical engineer for a few years. They had a very comfortable and upwardly mobile life in Dubuque. By the culture's criteria of success, their current position didn't look like much: nor did it look very promising. "How did you get here," I asked. The answer they gave struck me with enduring power. "If you go outside." she said, "and look due west, you will see tracks across the prairie. They are from our heels. God called. We dug our heels in and then God dragged us. And we argued every single mile of the way."

I never forgot that. What a curious image of God - dragging, pushing, pulling my friends across the corn fields of the Midwest. It's a mental picture I've never been about to forget. The reason it struck me so, is that it confirmed my own deepening sense that God does not only act in this world in ways which are clear, precise, polite, in cadence of the King James Version, at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, with "Just as I am" playing on the organ, full vibrato. it was a great gift they gave me: a moment of theological insight when I was able to see that God is sometimes a stranger who accosts us expectedly. Who comes right into the ordinariness of our lives, who contends with us in sleepless nights. After all, I had tried everything I knew how to convince myself that I should be doing something, anything, but preparing for ministry, and it was in that personal wrestling that I came to include the Beloved Adversary as part of my own most personal faith.

Now I look back and see the motif a lot. The giants of faith, the important figures out of our tradition, have been drawn to the story of Jacob wrestling with a stranger through the night. The reason, I have concluded, is that the great spirits of the faith, got to be great because they, too, had wrestled and struggled and agonized... Martin Luther wrote about this incident: "Words will not tell us what the struggle was like. Only those who have tasted such an experience know; no one else can understand it." [Gerhard von Rad, Biblical Interpretations on Preaching, p.41]

Luther knew about the experience because he too had been accosted and had wrestled with God through long, sleepless hours.

The truth is that if you and I are alive intellectually, but more important spiritually, we will be accosted by some strangers with whom we will have to struggle. The truth is that God is the one with whom we ultimately have to do. The truth is that God does not let us alone until we come to terms with him.

The mystics and artists and philosophers have known that even when the Church has forgotten it. When the Church loses its voice and its nerve and can no longer call the culture, the nation, to account for its behavior, someone else will; a painter, a folk singer, a poet. God will get our attention. Frederick Nietsche was disdainful of organized religion precisely because he understood the power inherent in the very idea of God. In a novel one of his characters argues that God must be killed: "God looks with eyes that see everything. He peers into man's ground and depth, into his hidden shame and ugliness. ["Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundation, p. 42] Paul Tillich wrote, "He is

only God because he's inescapable. And only that which is inescapable is God." [Ibid, p. 40]

The God who is truly God will accost us. Will surprise us. Will confront us and challenge us and contend with us through the night. If we are looking for a God who provides only comfort, blessed assurance and the emotional gratification of being alone in the garden with one who "walks with me, and talks with me, and tells me I am his own," we will likely miss this adversary who leaps at us out of the darkness and wrestles us until dawn.

Every encounter with God is not a comfortable experience. Every religious experience does not end up with reconciliation, healing and happiness. I would suggest to you that God's way with us is to trouble our conscience and force us to wrestle when we would rather relax. If your conscience is bothered, as mine is, by the fact that our nation is number one in the world in expenditures for military purposes and 17th in the world in infant mortality, I would suggest at least one of the reasons is that there is a God of justice to whom we are accountable and that God has a way of accosting us when we are not expecting it. No one wants to have to contend with that. No one wants to have to grapple with conflicting claims of national security and health care. No one wants to have to struggle with the difficult and painful public issues of abortion, birth control and AIDS testing. I'd far rather sleep than worry about the conflicting claims of Industry and the Environmentalists over toxic waste. But may I suggest that the reality of God - the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel, the God of Jesus Christ - is in those contentions, exasperating and difficult struggles? May I propose that God is present in issues we would prefer to ignore, and that a religion which disguises that, which offers itself as a respite, a haven, an escape from that, is an irrelevant religion, which never listened to this important and magnificent old story.

Jacob never did get a clear shot at him. He never did discover his adversary's name.

In his world to know the name of something was to control it. That's why people in the Old Testament culture don't say the name of God. There is intentional obscurity here. The mystery remains.

The trouble with a lot of religion, it seems to me, is that it claims to know too much. Preachers sound sometimes as if they have wrestled with God and pinned him, extracted a name from God. This story, with the adversary remaining a mystery is a reminder that our truth is not the whole truth, our insight is not the whole picture. Some of the saddest moments in history have occurred when religious people have forgotten that. This story is a word about mystery and about having some empty spaces in our theology, our own religion, for God to be God, on God's terms, not ours.

What a man! The people of Israel thought about Jacob when they heard this story. Spending the night alone, waiting, and when he is accosted by an anonymous adversary, holding his own, wrestling with strength and determination. What a man this Jacob is, refusing to let go until he knew a name, or until he receives a blessing. (See Bruggemann,

Interpretation, Genesis]

What a man, emerging from an encounter with God, crippled, but with a new name and a new future.

It was a soul stirring, invigorating story and still is.

But what must have perplexed and dismayed and moved them deeply was the notion that the adversary was God, that the wrestling was provoked by God, that Jacob - holding his own through the night as the battle raged - was clinging to an extraordinary and radically different God from any they had ever heard of. This God becomes vulnerable. This God wrestles, contends with, exposes self to injury, defeat even.

And in that is a foretaste, a hint of that moment of amazing grace, which Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and their descendants produced generations later in Bethlehem of Judea. God became human and lived among us. The word became flesh, full of grace and truth and full also of the limits and vulnerability of humanness. Full also of God's stubborn contentiousness, God's absolute refusal to let us go, to give up on us. The Gospel here is that he will accost us with love and mercy and goodness and grace.

He is a Beloved Adversary. But he will not leave us alone. He will contend with us, challenge us and wrestle with us. In Jesus Christ God will contend for our conscience - our devotion - our commitment. In Jesus Christ God will fight for our love - our soul.

That's what Jacob discovered. That's what this perplexing incident meant. And so he did what he had to do - he hung on with all his might and in the early light of dawn, limped across the border into the promised land.

So may it be for you.

God will not answer all your questions.

God will not reveal all of himself.

God will continue to surprise you and contend with you and give you sleepless nights. You may be changed by your encounter with God. You may pick up a new name and a limp.

But, by grace, our dear and Beloved Adversary will not leave us alone...

God will never give up on us. God will challenge us. God will love us. God - Beloved Adversary - will be our God.

Cling to him.

Amen.